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ABSTRACT

The western intellectual tradition promotes a unique style of thinking and writing that cannot readily embrace other ways of understanding human experience and communicating about it. Three fundamental differences in the ways east and west approach oral and written communication and the thinking that lies behind it are: first, a preference for indirect versus direct forms of discourse; second, promoting the goals of the group versus those of the individual; and third, valuing ancient knowledge and wisdom versus valuing novelty and the peculiar kind of creativity that comes from the idea of an independent mind. These non-western traditions are based on deeper assumptions of how society should work, directly at odds with those of many American university instructors. To transcend the boundary between western and world majority communication and thinking styles, instructors would have to agree or be convinced, for instance, that maintaining group solidarity or harmony is more important than being yourself, that tradition is more meaningful than history, and that the students' role is to thoroughly internalize what others have done rather than to critically question their own assumptions or the words of their teaches and texts. Understanding how a Quaker meeting for business functions, with its sense of the meeting as a collectivist process, can perhaps illuminate how members of non-western cultures can find the U.S. university's conception of thinking powerful but narrow. (Includes 10 notes.) (CR)

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"And Never the Twain Shall Meet":
International Students Writing for a U.S. University Audience

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ED 400 540

Because we wanted this panel to be provocative I have decided to argue something that I usually don't dare touch; the conservative-sounding notion that the western intellectual tradition promotes a unique style of thinking and writing that cannot readily embrace other ways of understanding human experience and communicating about it, ways that international students from "non-western" countries as well as many of our own multicultural population bring, sometimes, to the university classroom. In other words, I will argue that as much as I hate to admit it, when it comes to the most fundamental assumptions about thought and communication, Kipling was right: "east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet" -- at least when you want to get an A on a poli sci paper or make a good impression on a dissertation committee.

In my book, *Listening to the World,* [1]I outline three fundamental differences in the ways east and west approach oral and written communication and the thinking that lies behind it: first, a preference for indirect forms of discourse vs. a preference for straightforwardness and specificity; second, promoting the goals of the group vs. those of the individual; and third, valuing ancient knowledge and wisdom vs. valuing novelty and the peculiar kind of creativity that comes from the idea of an independent mind. In fact, I argue that these differences characterize not only the east-west dichotomy noticed by Kipling, but also, the split between those touched most strongly by the western tradition (whatever country, or class or subculture they live in) and those who make up most of the rest of the world -- the "world majority."

I exaggerate these differences in thinking and communication styles for an important reason: that if we emphasize our many human similarities[2] or if we focus only on the multiplicity of traditions that result from the fragmentation and blending of cultures that has always occurred and that has accelerated in recent years through migration and invasion and trade and educational exchange and television and international capitalism and the Internet, we will fail to notice the most fundamental differences that underlie the thinking and communication strategies of these two grand traditions. And no matter what tradition we come from, these strategies are so basic to our conception of ourselves, learned so early and internalized so thoroughly

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[1] Fox, H. (1994). *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

[2] See, for example Solomon, R.C.: The Cross Cultural Comparison of Emotion. Marks, J. and Ames, R.T. (Eds.) (1995) *Emotions In Asian Thought: A Dialogue in Comparative Philosophy.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

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that we hardly consider them cultural at all, but rather "effective communication" or "good writing" or just -- "normal".

The easiest of these differences[3] to recognize is a preference, on the part of the world majority, for subtle or discursive communication that puts the responsibility for interpretation and understanding on the audience, rather than on the speaker or writer. Many of us have seen the results of these cultural values in student writing: the senior from Brazil, effortlessly bilingual, who writes elegantly about issues that seem totally extraneous to her problem statement; the Japanese freshman who starts each paragraph with some abstract, general comments that lead gradually up to the point, with the expectation that the reader will not mind waiting patiently for the meaning to come into focus, and then beginning again, slowly, with other general abstractions before getting to the gist of the next paragraph, and so on. Or the Chinese American sophomore, writing about his father's profession as a traditional healer, who tries to convince us of the credibility of eastern medicine not by giving reasons, but by simply listing the names and categories and functions of various herbs, letting us come to the conclusion that such a pharmacology must have a history as distinguished and complex as the western and thus, have a similar value and effectiveness. These are not writing styles per se, but tendencies to display learning and intelligence in a way that is sophisticated and interesting and sensitive to audience expectations. For regardless of what they have learned about English language and style in their ESL classes, students brought up to value subtlety or to give sensitive and thorough attention to context feel it is only natural to spare the reader the boredom of a plodding text with its step by step logic, its frequent and obvious signposting, its words chosen more for their precision than for their power of suggestion. "This is a watch, the watch is brown, da-da, da-da," mimicked a Chilean graduate student. "It sounds so childish!"

Now if this tendency toward indirectness were the extent of the cultural differences, we might not have too much trouble opening up the US university to other forms of expression. Building on the kinds of indirection the university has always considered normal: poetry and fiction, for example, and perhaps incorporating some of the abstractness and discursiveness of other western cultural styles such as those of, say, French philosophy, and encouraging more unapologetically fragmented academic argument in a kind of Postmodern celebration of subjective discourse, language games, heterogeneous identities, and ephemeral subjects[4] we might be able to enlarge the mainstream vision and make the world majority more comfortable -- at least in some university departments, some of the time.

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[3] Or what Hord and Lee call "generative themes" to avoid being reductionist. See Hord, F.L. and Lee, J. S. (Eds.) (1986) I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 7.

[4] See Harris, L. (1993). Postmodernism and Utopia, an Unholy Alliance. In Hord, F.L. and Lee, J.S. (Eds.) (1995) *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy.* Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

But non-western traditions of indirection are based on deeper assumptions about how society should work that are directly at odds with those of many US university instructors, especially the most progressive among us. If we wanted to transcend the boundary between western and world majority communication and thinking styles, we would have to agree -- or more than agree, I think -- we'd have to be *convinced* that maintaining group solidarity or harmony is more important than being yourself, that tradition is more meaningful than history, that aesthetic or spiritual order, created out of an unspoken, or perhaps "felt" dialogue between subject and object, is more valuable than rational order that provides a framework for objective analysis; and that the students' role is to thoroughly internalize what others have done rather than to critically question their own assumptions or the words of their teachers and texts.

Let us look at some of these assumptions. If you come from a culture that values group solidarity or harmony over self-expression or self-actualization, you have learned very early to pay close attention to others' unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Because you "know" what others are experiencing, you don't need to put everything into words. And because you expect others to pay attention to your own unexpressed thoughts and feelings, you assign more responsibility for miscommunication to the reader or listener.[5] In a group oriented society, questions about personal identity -- who you really are or what you are becoming, what your true voice sounds like or whether you can make your mark on the world before you retire -- all of these are much less important than your feelings of belonging and connectedness and agreement with what everyone in your group thinks, and does, and aspires to. [6] Thus when you write, you are not so concerned about whose ideas are whose. Intellectual property isn't much of an issue to you. The idea of plagiarism may seem curiously illogical. Your goal in communication is expressing what "we" think, rather than what you as an individual might really think. But your primary goal isn't what we would call "effective communication" at all, but rather effective listening and interpretation. Sometimes you are listening to nature. Sometimes you are listening to a painting, or an arrangement of stones or an elder, a teacher, a public figure. Often, just as in US mainstream culture, you are listening to people tell their stories. These narratives might be incredibly rich and detailed and digressive, but they also might leave out details that in a more western context are considered essential. You are supposed to hint and imply, and your audience is supposed to "get it." And they *can* get it, both because they have been

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[5] See work on individualism and collectivism such as Singelis, T. M. and William J. Brown (March, 1995). Culture, Self, and Collectivist Communication. *Human Communication Research, 21, 3,* 354-389; Triandis, H.C., Bontempo, R., Villareal, M.J., Asai, M., &Lucca, N. (!988); Individualism and collectivism: Cross-cultural perspectives on self-in-group relations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54,* 323-338.

[6] See, for example, Hord, F.L. and Lee, J.S. (Eds.) (1995). *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy.* Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. Introduction, 9.

brought up to attend to the unspoken, and because they have agreed to agree with you.

Second point, and an interesting one: that in most of the world's cultures, tradition is a more meaningful interpretive context than history. I've been reading a fascinating, difficult book by David Hall and Roger Ames called *Thinking Through Confucius,* which is an attempt to interpret central problems in western philosophy by using Confucian categories of experience. These categories, the authors claim, have been misinterpreted in the past because of translation difficulties, not only in finding English words that describe the Chinese experience, but also in understanding that experience well enough to communicate it at all. The authors' idea that tradition, rather than history is the interpretive context for both Chinese philosophy and Chinese cultural experience can be applied more widely, I believe, to any culture that sees itself as more "traditional" than "modern."

Hall and Ames remind us that the central concept of history is the idea of **agency**. Historical figures act, and historians and philosophers interpret their acts by determining **causes** and **meanings** of events. [7] Their task, and the task of the student of history, is to break down the stream of life into pieces, assign value to each of these pieces, shuffle them around, and fit them into an analytical grid or framework that will help make meaning of the chaos of events. In contrast, societies where tradition is more central are not as concerned with what caused this or that event in the past, or who invented this or that custom or came up with any particular idea. Even Confucius himself, the authors suggest, may not be a historical figure at all, but a composite, a "'corporate' person who is continually being seen in a new way by virtue of the participation of later thinkers in the ongoing transmission of cultural values."[8] Since the purpose of tradition is to "maintain institutional and cultural continuity with a minimum of conscious intervention,"[9] the task of the student is to "become aware,"[10] to appropriate and embody one's cultural tradition, to memorize, and internalize, and finally, when one becomes a scholar, to elaborate and refine and articulate human values in order to preserve them, to transmit them to the next generation.

Thus, when we see students who come from world majority cultures who are perplexed or frustrated at our cheerful insistence that they dissect their personal experience and make explicit meaning of it, that they come up with their own thesis to analyze a piece of literature, that they apply a psychological theory or a historical framework to particular events, we can understand, perhaps, how uncomfortable our progressive teaching can make them feel. But if, in an attempt to broaden the way thinking and writing is done at the US university, we would say, "All right, let's value the inherent feeling of rightness of ritual rather than being so concerned about causes; let's

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[7] Hall, D.L. and Ames, R.T. (1987). *Thinking Through Confucius.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 21.
[8] ibid. 24
[9] ibid. 22
[10] ibid. 44

internalize group norms and stop making such a fuss about being individuals; let's get away from this cult of creative problem solving, and get into feeling and sensing the rightness of our cultural heritage". . . well, here we would be deep in the layers of a logical dilemma, unless we were really ready to go out on a limb and put aside strict logic, and say that things can be interpreted in seemingly opposite ways simultaneously, as they can in India, where I myself became perplexed and frustrated as a young science teacher, many years ago, not yet having examined my own cultural assumptions.

Of course assumptions can be stronger or weaker; they can change, gradually, as one begins to understand a new cultural context. Since universities and even high schools abroad are based on western models, at least on the surface, world majority students come with a general idea of how the US university operates and the expectations of our professors. But because assumptions about knowledge and communication style are so deeply embedded in our ways of thinking, major difficulties still arise.

A Thai student recently came to me for help on his statement of purpose for a Ph.D. program in architecture. He wants to research contemporary Thai architectural theory, which, he tells me, has never been written down, nor is it mentioned in lectures or professional conversations as it is in the US. But it is there, he believes, inherent in the buildings themselves, and in the minds of architects who he plans to interview about how they conceptualized and designed their particular work. Their thinking has been influenced by architectural "theory" of the past -- similarly unwritten and unspoken, but possibly referred to obliquely in ancient documents, which he plans to research.

I love this idea, that theory can be embedded in buildings, that it can be deduced from indirect references in ancient texts and in the subtle, discursive or highly contextualized speech of interview subjects, and that one might use these hints and essences as "evidence" that the theory is there. But because US assumptions are individualist, because our society assumes the rightness of explicit communication, solid evidence, and theory that is based on principles, or general laws, this student will have trouble with his dissertation committee. For the process he has in mind is holistic, empathetic, appreciative, requiring much skill in creative interpretation. And the knowledge to be gained will not be entirely separate from the texts or the buildings or the people who design them, and thus will be resistant to demands for clarity and critical analysis.

It's not that there are no examples in western culture of the ways of thinking and communicating of the world majority. For example, Quakers have a way of determining "the sense of the meeting," that resonates with the process the Thai architecture student would like to employ in his Ph.D. research. In a Quaker meeting for business, the people who attend have a chance to speak their feelings and ideas about a matter to be decided with no interruptions, no requirements to follow the previous point or stick exactly to the subject. After everyone has had the opportunity to speak their mind -- though no one is *required* to do so -- the clerk determines, for the record,

what the group as a whole has decided, that is, the "sense of the meeting," not by tallying yeas and nays, as in Robert's Rules of Order, and not exactly by consensus, either, but by a felt sense of how the body as a whole is responding to the question at hand. It takes practice, concentration, empathy, attention, and something more perhaps, something English has no vocabulary adequate to describe, to feel the sense of the 'corporate boc'v' made up of the many opinionated and highly individualistic people Quakers are known to be. Even with its individualistic overlay, finding the sense of the meeting is a collectivist process; it's more of a back and forth sensing, a felt dialogue than it is a tallying or an analysis. It is a beautiful, meaningful interaction. But if you or I were to become expert in this practice and then try to introduce it into the university as a new variety of data collection, if we were to claim that we "know" how people think without asking them explicitly, or without having something we could call clear evidence, we would have trouble with the sociology department and the political science department and the economics people and the geologists, and the biostatisticians, and so on. Like it or not, the US university is based on a powerful, but at the same time, extremely narrow conception of thinking and communicating that has made possible all sorts of scientific explorations and ideas and inventions. But think of its potential to understand and value and dignify all of human experience if it were only aware of the cultural assumptions that limit its imagination.